I Remember the 1930s – Amateur Radio's 'Golden Years'

Commentary

By Jim Pepper, W6QIF

Do you remember when? To borrow a line from Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities,* "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times . . ."

Just as the country was just coming out of the Great Depression, clouds of war were gathering on the horizon. It was the late 1930s.

Radio's popularity in the amateur ranks was ever growing. Television hadn't yet become a viable medium. Cell phones were only a dream. Computers were in the crudest mechanical forms.

I received my first ham license in 1937 when I was in high school. Unlike many of my friends, I hadn't yet built my transmitter. They constructed their rig and were on the air even before their license arrived in the mail. We called them *bootleggers.*

My first contact was on 80 meters. I still remember it. I worked a station in San Luis Obispo, California, about 300 miles from my house. *What a thrill.*

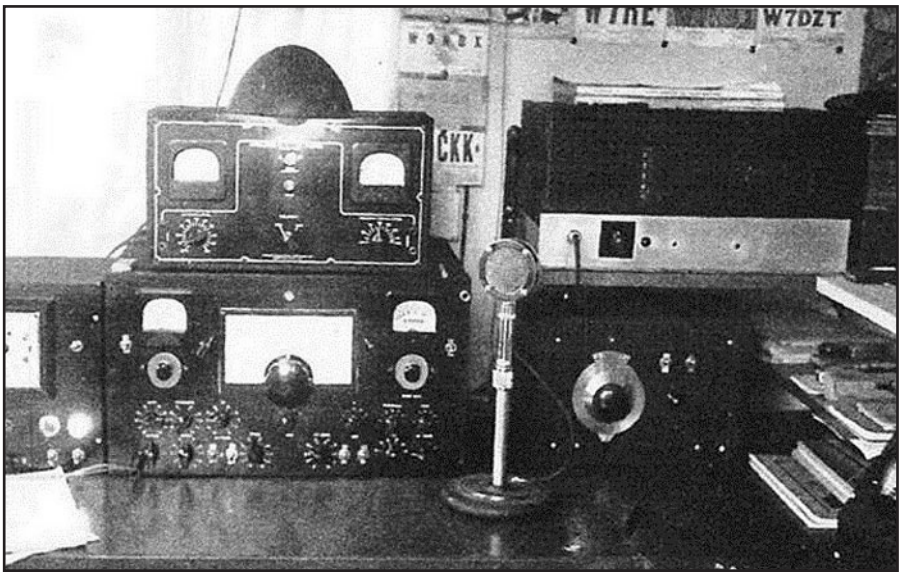
Becoming a radio amateur in the '30s meant passing an exam many people believe is more rigorous than today's.

In most cases, becoming a ham back then meant going to a Federal Radio Commission (FRC) or Federal Communications Commission (FCC) office in a federal building known as a Custom House, located in cities around the country.

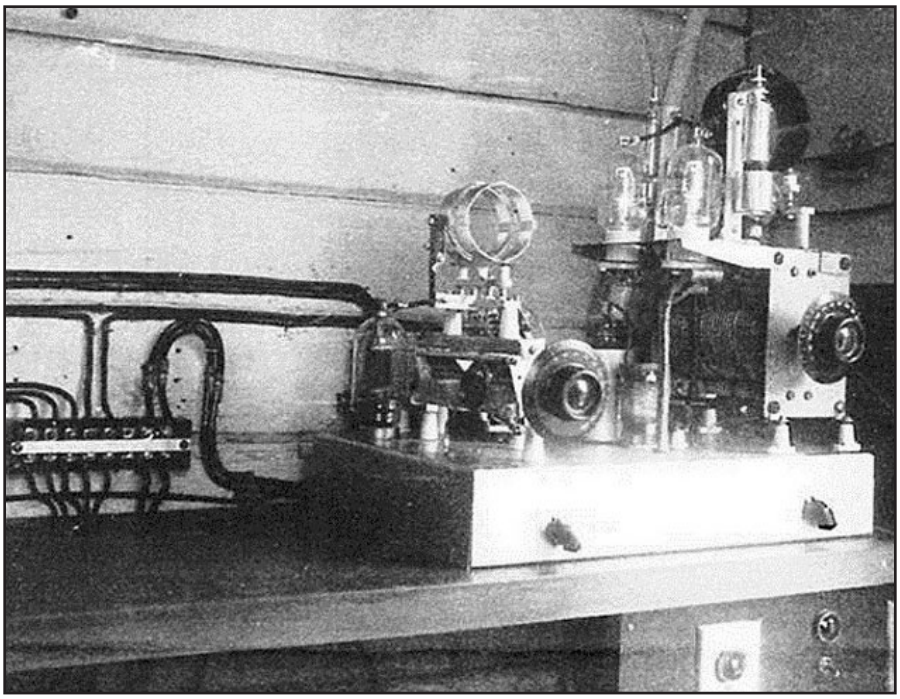
By the way, the Communications Act of 1934 established the Federal Communications Commission, which would replace the FRC.

At the exam site, you'd first take the Morse code receiving test. To pass, at least one minute of the three minutes of text had to be copied perfectly. If you got over that hurdle, the examiner would ask you to send code — at the receiving speed, or higher.

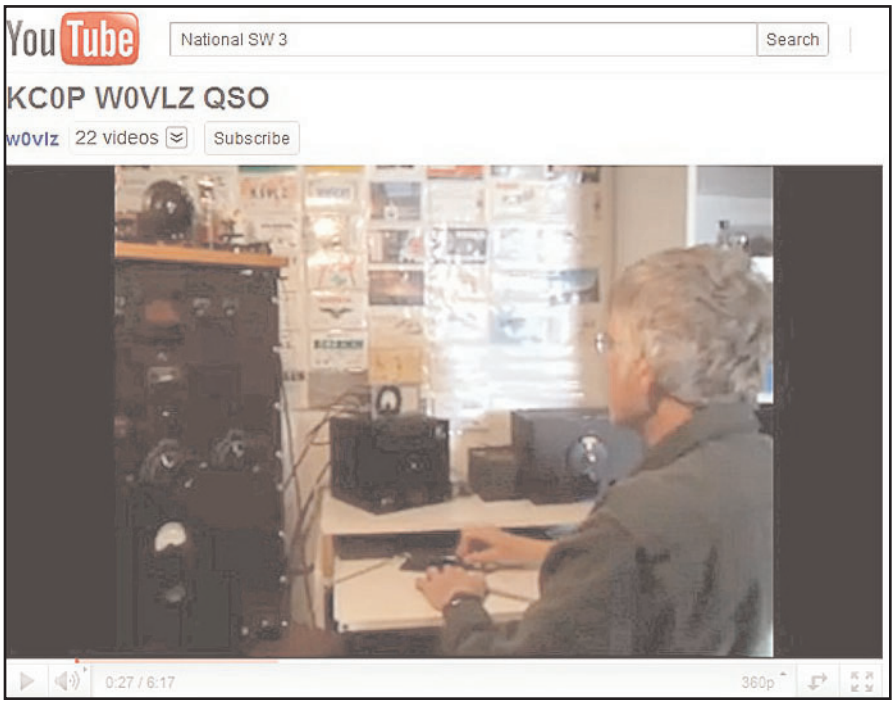
Next: The written test. But it was not the multiple-choice exam we see today. I remember being asked to "draw the circuit diagram of the type of transmitter you are planning to use and briefly explain its operation."



A homebrew receiver, lower right, was part of Jim Pepper, W6QIF's, station layout in decades gone by. *(Courtesy of W6QIF)*



In 1948, shielding wasn't much of a concern at W6QIF. Television was in its infancy at the time. A pair of HK-24 triodes provided the "umph" in this beautiful, open-air homebrew transmitter. *(Courtesy of W6QIF)*



Watch William Wiegand, WØVLZ, of Rochester, Minnesota, put a vintage National SW-3 regenerative receiver through its paces in a crosstown QSO with Melvyn Larson, KCØP. < http://bit.ly/lmnisp >. *(You Tube video screen grab)*

In 1933, the FRC established three classifications of amateur radio license. Class A was the highest and authorized its holder full privileges.

Class B was an equivalent to today's General Class license, with broad privileges, except for operation on phone frequencies reserved for the Class A operator.

Class C had the same privileges as Class B operators, but were examined by other radio amateurs, rather than having to travel to a federal Custom House. To qualify, applicants had to prove they lived more than 125 airline miles from the nearest examination office. Their code and written tests were given by a Class A or B amateur operator, or some otherwise-qualified FRC or FCC official.

Class B licensees had to wait at least one year before being eligible to take the Class A exam, which consisted of more difficult technical questions.

All the classes were permitted to operate on 160 meters — 1750 to 2000 kilocycles, or kc. Today we call them kilohertz — kHz, but that's another story.

Other bands were available, with certain restrictions. The phone portion of the 80-meter band was known as 75 meters, and required a Class A license. The same was true for 20 meters. Can you imagine: 40 meters was CW-only. And mobile operation was restricted to frequencies above 28 megacycles, Mc. — what we refer to as megahertz (MHz) these days.

In the VHF realm, there were the predecessors of the 6- and 2-meter bands — known back then as 5 and 2.5 meters.

There were nine call districts — one shy of today's 1 through Ø. All prefixes were W, with the exception of U.S. possessions, which began with K. Hawaii, for example, was K6. Alaska was K7.

In 1951, the FCC created six classes to replace the A, B and C tickets we knew.

Many newcomers to amateur radio started out on 80 meters — building their transmitter, which was often crystal controlled. After calling *CQ*, we'd tune the entire band to see if anyone was responding to our call. Often, two stations in QSO were at opposite ends of the band.

The next move was often to 160, where the addition of a modulator would put us on AM phone. Of course, we'd have to change crystals and inductances in our 80-meter transmitter circuit, as well.

Going from an 80-meter, half-wave antenna to 160 meters meant only tuning it *against ground*. If you didn't have a half-wave, then a Marconi (quarter-wave) was the next best thing.

Newcomers with the financial means would buy their receiver — while those without deep pockets generally had to build. Popular at the time were the National SW-3 and FB-7 and Hallicrafters Sky Buddy and Sky Champion. There was the Bretting 12, Patterson PR10, Hammarlund HQ120 and RME69. Almost everyone, though, built their transmitter.

It was a friendly time — especially on 160. Conversations dealt mainly with signal reports and description of your transmitter, from microphone to final amplifier tube.

Power was measured, but in the form of input to the final stage. It was not output *power-to-the-antenna* we use today.

There was seldom profanity. As I remember it, *"Get off my frequency"* and other raucous outbursts were not part of the radio amateur's operating procedure back then.

Transmitting music was allowed, as I recall, for radio testing and only for short periods of time. *Ah, the 1930s.*

I certainly have enjoyed my 73 years as a radio amateur and still find time to design and build gear. And, of course, getting time on the air to see how it all works!

(Jim Pepper, W6QIF, lives in Orinda, California. – Ed.)

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